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The
Methodist Preacher
A Man of Good Cheer



An Address Delivered Before the
Historical Society of the Upper South Carolina Conference,
Main Street Church, Columbia, S. C.,
November 7, 1933

And Before the
Historical Society of the South Carolina Conference,
Lyttleton Street Church, Camden, S. C.,
November 14, 1933



By J. HUBERT NOLAND
OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE

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The Methodist Preacher:

A Man of Good Cheer

"His religion was of the genial, cheerful type; there was no gloom in his face or in his heart; his presence carried sunlight into thousands of homes."—Minutes South Carolina Conference, 1893.

That is a tribute by Dr. J. Thomas Pate in 1893 to Rev. William H. Lawton, who was in a marked degree all that is there said of him. And it is as well a most appropriate appraisal of Methodist preachers as a whole. It is quite true necessarily that all do not measure alike in this respect even as they do not in other gifts and graces. But there is in the Methodist itinerancy and religion that which demands geniality and good cheer, dispels and forbids gloominess of the countenance and of the heart, and impels and compels the carriage of sunlight unto and into thousands of homes.

By Train and Auto

The automobile has done much for and to the Methodist preacher. It has lengthened his life perhaps but has unquestionably shortened his daily cash balance. It has also robbed him of the delightful travel by train to Annual Conferennces. For aboard the old-fashioned passenger coach in spite of its cinders and dust a trip to an Annual Conference was a joy-ride indeed. That which was lost in speed was more than made up in fellowship and good cheer. Railway stations and junctions along the route were marked by the arrival of new men and by the heartiest greetings. The Hardscrabbles and the Highsteeple were scrapped in the general chorus of a "Good Year!" Conversations were by no means confined to "shop talk." Formalities were in the discard. Good humor prevailed. It was a love feast, but of the lighter experiences. For example, one preacher had spent the night in a home where the

house was small and the family large. There were several beds but only one bed room. The preacher was becoming perplexed as to what was to be done with him when bed time should arrive. When it did, he was assigned a place beside a bed in one corner, and lights were out. Undressing was not as difficult as in an upper berth of a modern Pullman, but about the time everybody should have been asleep, a woman's voice rang out from somewhere in the darkness: "Preacher! Is your head high enough?" And without waiting for a reply a pillow was shot across the room and it landed with full force squarely on the preacher's head. And so the conversations ran. The automobile has changed the mode of travel, but not the spirit of the men. They ride in smaller groups and often pass each other on improved highways without recognition, greetings or farewells, but arriving at the meeting place of the Conference, they mingle in the old fashioned freedom with its exhilarating exchange of happy experiences and bright bits of repartee that have been since the memory of a Methodist preacher runneth not to the contrary.

Frontier and Mother Country

Methodist history is replete with stories which rival the best of fiction. One story that is sometimes related as though never really happening is a true incident in the life of Richmond Nolley who was a member of the South Carolina Conference from 1808 to 1815 and who finally met a tragic death in the midst of heroic service on the frontier. Once while pushing his way through what was then a wilderness but that is now the state of Mississippi, Nolley came upon a freshly made wagon track. He followed it and was led to where an emigrant family had begun to pitch their future home. A man was unhitching horses from a wagon. A woman was busily engaged around a newly made fire. Nolley hailed the man who turned and seeing Nolley exclaimed: 'What! Have you found us already? Another Methodist preacher! I left Virginia to get out of reach of them; went to Georgia and thought I'd have a rest but they got my wife and daughter in the church. Then I found this land in Choctaw Corner, and here is one before my wagon is unloaded.' Nolley replied, "My friend,

if you to go heaven, you'll find Methodist preachers there; and if to hell, I am afraid you'll find some there; and you see how it is in this world, so you had better make terms with us and be at peace."—Minutes of the South Carolina Conference, 1876, p. 52.

And so it is unto this very day. Wherever you may go you are apt to run up against a Methodist preacher and when you do you find him the same helpful, cheerful friend, a radiant messenger of good cheer and peace to a world burdened by sin and broken by tribulation.

In England in the very midst of the severest persecutions and hardships, we find him a man of this sort. We are told that in Cornwall where John Wesley and John Nelson were holding a meeting, they were both occupying a room for several nights and had no bed but the bare floor. Wesley had his coat for a pillow and Nelson for his a copy of Burkitt's "Notes on the New Testament." About three o'clock in the night Wesley turned over and finding Nelson also awake clapped him on the side and said, "Brother Nelson, let us be of good cheer; I have one whole side yet, for the skin is off but one side."—The Story of Methodism, by A. B. Hyde, p. 109.

Scholar and Rustic

Perhaps some of us who have attended the Pastors' Schools which are now in vogue and have witnessed the school-boy pranks of grown men who are there for the avowed purpose of study have found it difficult to escape the idea that somehow the early Methodists were never so undignified. But Bishop William Capers relieves our consciences somewhat. In the year 1828 he visited Dr. Adam Clarke of whom we think as the personification of scholarly dignity, yet this is what he says of him: "No one can be more perfectly unbent than Dr. Clarke in the company of his friends. . . . His whole manner is as easy, playful, and familiar as can be conceived; such as in turn would equally interest a scholar or a child." Bishop Capers then tells how this dignified doctor jumped up from his table and went for a jaunty hat which Mr. Wesley had expressed

great disapproval at his preachers wearing, and placing it upon his head "saluted with great humor, bowing profoundly, as if not only to show the hat, but also the younger manners of the wearers of it."—Wightman's *Life of William Capers*, p. 280. And we may even quote Dr. Clarke himself, not as he speaks of himself but in terms which apply to men in general: "Those who represent, by painting or otherwise, a **wise man**, with a **gravely sour face**, striking awe and forbidding approach, have either mistaken the man, or are unacquainted with some of the essential principles of their art."—Commentary on Ecclesiastes 8:1.

Lorenzo Dow (1777-1834) was the pioneer travelling evangelist. But unlike many of the modern variety he continually refused to accept money for his services. He suffered to the point of death in privations and persecutions. But as contradictory as it may seem, he would have been a great adjunct to a Pastors' School on "stunt nights." Roy Wilkes presenting a pair of suspenders to Dr. Gilbert T. Rowe because that distinguished instructor had a habit of jerking up the waistband of his pants not only in the classroom, but in the pulpit and on the platform, could learn a lesson or two in practical joking from Lorenzo.

On one occasion Dow was talking with a learned doctor who contended that there was nothing real but that all things were by force of imagination. The doctor, who was smoking, laid his pipe down upon a table and turned his face toward a window. "There, Mr. Dow," said he pointing to the opposite side of the street, "there is a wagon as I imagine, but it is all the force of—" While the doctor was talking and before he could finish his sentence, Dow had picked up the pipe and emptied the hot tobacco into the doctor's boot. He seized his boot with both hands and with an oath exclaimed, "What are you about?" "Nothing but imagination," said Dow, "Nothing but imagination!" And leaving the doctor to work out his own theories Dow traveled on to meet his next appointment where he preached from the text,—*"The Force of Imagination."*—Dow's Work, p. 94.

Yesterday and Today

The Methodist preacher as we find him today is not like malted milk, a modern invention, nor like the South Pole a new discovery. From a history of Methodism published in the middle of the last century we quote:

‘Notwithstanding their many hardships, Methodist preachers were notable as a cheerful, if not indeed a humorous class of men. Their hopeful theology, their continual success, their conscious self-sacrifice for the good of others, the great variety of characters they met in their travels, and their habit of self-accommodation to all, gave them an ease, a bonhomie, which often took the form of jocular humor; and the occasional morbid minds among them could hardly resist the infectious example of their happier brethren. Wesley himself mentions their cheerfulness as one reason why they were disliked by a class of Churchmen and other Christians. ‘Grave and solemn men,’ he says, ‘dislike many of the Methodist preachers for having nothing of that gravity and solemnity about them.’ Cheerful as he was himself, perhaps as much from the same causes as from his natural temperament, he found it necessary continually to enjoin upon them to ‘be serious,’ to ‘never be triflingly employed.’ While they were as earnest as men about to meet death, and full of tenderness which could ‘weep with those who wept’, no men could better ‘rejoice with those who rejoiced’. They were the best storytellers on their long circuits and of course had abundance of their own adventures to relate at the hearths and tables of their hosts. Not a few of them became noted throughout the United Kingdom as wits in the best sense of the term and were by their repartees, as well as their courage and religious earnestness, a terror to evil-doers. The American preachers were the greatest wits of the last century in the New World.”—Stevens History of Methodism, vol. ii, p. 469.

Rank and File

An instance of the independence and ready wit of the obscure preacher as far back as the time of Francis Asbury is the case of Billy Hibbard. His name had been entered and called as “William Hibbard.” He did not answer.

Bishop Asbury asked him if that was not his name. To which he replied, "My name is **Billy** Hibbard." "But," said Asbury, "Billy is a little boy's name." "I was a little boy when my father gave it to me," said Hibbard, and the historian tells us that "the Conference was convulsed with laughter." Yet some good people seem to think that an old time Methodist couldn't even smile! Going back to Hibbard, he was charged with practicing medicine, and the Bishop asked, "Are you a physician?" "I am not," said he, "I simply give advice in critical cases." "What do you mean by that?" "In critical cases I always advise them to send for a physician." Hibbard was once challenged by a noisy infidel who declared that a man's soul went with his body." Hibbard answered, "Suppose the body was yours and should by accident be eaten by a pig?" "Then I am soul and body in the pig." "And if the pig be made into soap?" "Then I am in the soap." "Well," said the preacher, "we'll leave you in the soap."—The Story of Methodism, A. B. Hyde, pp. 117, 118.

Turning the pages of history and coming to the present, Who has not heard the equal of such incidents? Allan Macfarlan is now an honored superannuate in the Florida Conference; but is a South Carolinian and began his ministry here. Few men were better at repartee. Once at a District Conference Bishop Duncan was bearing down on the preachers in regard to the details of their work. Coming to Macfarlan, he asked, "Have you a prayer-meeting on your circuit?" "Yes, Bishop, I have one." "How many attend that prayer-meeting?" "Oh," said Macfarlan, "about thirteen." "About thirteen?" said the Bishop, "Don't you suppose, if I were to come over and hold that prayer-meeting for you, there would be more than thirteen there?" "Yes, Bishop, there'd be fourteen. You'd be there." Macfarlan located for a time at the end of the conference year in 1899. Returning to his home community he carried with him several families to become tenants on an estate left by his father who was wealthy before the Civil War. A train of loaded wagons and buggies was consequently lined up in the business thoroughfare of the little village from which the move was to be made. It was also lined with

curious lookers-on. One of these, more facetious than wise, called out, "Hello! What is this? The Children of Israel?" Quickly Macfarlan leaned out of his buggy, waved his hand and shouted back, "Yes! We are leaving Egypt! We are going to Canaan! Good-bye, Old Pharaoh!"

Down to Old Age

For many years prior to his superannuation in 1905, a pleasant feature of our Annual Conferences was the report of the Rev. R. R. Dagnall. Brethren who chanced to be out of the conference room would crowd back when it became known that his name had been called. It was a bit of spice in the midst of a rather wearisome routine. One of these bits was his telling the presiding bishop in 1892 that there were a few vacancies in the presiding eldership and that he had heard some brethren say that they did not want the terrible responsibility to be put upon them. He said that he did not feel that way himself, but was willing and available, closing with this,

"I've waited long, am waiting still;
You treat no other friend so ill!"

At his superannuation he reported that he had served a hard circuit that year but that he had had a "good time"; that he had always served hard appointments but had always had a "good time"; that he had served the church not quite fifty years, had educated his children and had a modest house to move into; that he owed no man a dollar and had never asked any man in his life for the loan of as much as ten cents. It was not a boast but a happy testimony to God's unforgetting care.

Asbury and Wesley

Francis Asbury, of whose arduous labors we may well speak with emphasis, was sustained by a spirit of good cheer, beyond all doubt. He himself has said "If I were as grave as Bishop McKendree, I would live but a short time." And we find a few sparkles of this spirit in the drudgery of keeping a diary of his daily doings. We may quote him briefly:

"On Tuesday we stopped at **Woods**—in the woods! His house being unfinished, there were masons, and carpenters, and gentlemen, and riflemen, and whiskey toppers, besides gnats and bats, which ever flew in and out. We quitted our purgatory upon paying two dollars and a half for three of us."—Francis Asbury, Tipple, p. 178.

"We came to Samuel **Green's**—in pleasing manners and ners and sincere friendship, an **evergreen**."—Shipp's Methodism in South Carolina, p. 377.

And this may sound a little scratchy, but Asbury wrote it:

"I have taken the itch—strange I have not taken it twenty time. There is no security in these filthy beds but sleeping in a sulphur shirt! . . . The people are the kindest, but what can kindness do with a log cabin twelve by ten, cold and rain without and six adults and as many children (one always in motion, to say nothing of dogs) within?"—The Story of Methodism, A. B. Hyde, p. 128.

We quote this characterization of him: "Ordinarily solemn in manner, inclined to taciturnity in private circles, he was a charming conversationalist, and would relate amusing incidents and droll experiences. As a road companion no man could be more agreeable; he was cheerful almost to gaiety; his conversation was spritely and sufficiently seasoned with wit and anecdote. . . . Naturally witty and satirical, good sense and grace always were regnant, and he never was undignified or malicious."—Francis Asbury, Tipple, p. 320.

Turning now to the founder of Methodism, we quote from a diferent historian a very similar characterization of John Wesley:

"A fine humor pervaded the nature of Wesley and often gave a readiness to his words. The devout Thomas Walsh, morbidly scrupulous, complained in a letter to him that among the 'three or four persons that tempted' him to levity, 'you, sir, are one by your witty proverbs.' Wesley's humor, however, enhanced the blandness of his piety and

enabled him to convey reproof in a manner which could hardly be resented with ill-temper. . . . He was a welcome guest of humble households, the delight of dinner-tables, the familiar companion of children."—Stevens History of Methodism, vol. ii, p. 385.

A fine illustration of Mr. Wesley's happy manner of meeting a trying situation is in his having been met by a blustering rowdy who blocked his path saying, "I never make way for a fool!" "I always do!" said Wesley stepping aside and passing quietly on.—Stevens History of Methodism.

Time Would Fail

In conclusion, if this meeting should be turned into a "That-Reminds-Me" convention, we might meet in adjourned sessions for a "Thousand and One Nights," and there would, as in the case of Shahrazad, always be a better story waiting to be told. But the object of this paper is not to tell nor to have told all that is possible or even available, but to bring out or to lay emphasis upon the fact that Methodist preachers are not and have never been prophets of gloom, ascetics, or denatured saints, but men, very real men, whose religion is and has always been of a genial, cheerful type, and whose presence carries and has always carried sunlight into numberless hearts and homes. The men of today, whatever they may have in their own right, have unquestionably inherited the spirit of the fathers of Methodism.